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LAND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM -- OBJECTIVES AND ORGANIZATION

A radio talk by Maurice M. Kelso, Land Policy Section, AAA, delivered in the Department period of the National Farm and Home Hour, Friday, May 17, 1935, and broadcast by a network of 50 associated NBC radio stations.

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The Land Program of the Federal Government was officially launched in July of last year. At that time the sum of \$25,000,000 was allocated to the Federal Emergency Relief Administration for the purpose of carrying out a series of projects demonstrating better uses for poor land. A cooperative organization was formed, consisting of four bureaus from the Departments of Interior and Agriculture, through which the field activities were carried on. A special section of the Relief Administration, known as the Land Program, was created to coordinate the activities of the four technical agencies, and to supervise the expenditure of funds. This organization has recently been made a part of the newly created Resettlement Administration.

In the nine and one-half months of its independent operation, the Land Program carried its operations into 457 counties. Over 240 land purchase projects were initiated. Approximately 400,000 acres of land have been actually purchased for the Government while options have been obtained on a total of 6,000,000 acres. The acquisition and optioning of this acreage in so short a time is particularly noteworthy because of the fact that all purchase negotiations have been carried out on a completely voluntary basis. No condemnation proceedings have been resorted to by the Land Program in order to force landowners to sell their farms.

The Land Program includes a large and varied list of projects. In planning them, no attempt was made in Washington to decide which lands should be retired from cultivation, or devoted to forest or recreational use. Studies for this purpose were carried out in the field, and in addition our Regional Directors and their assistants discussed local conditions with county agents, with representatives of the State agricultural colleges and experiment stations, with State planning boards and others, in order to draw upon their intimate knowledge of economic and social conditions. Therefore, in picturing for you the kind of work which the Land Program has carried out, let me do so by describing the situation at Otter Creek, Kentucky, where one of our projects is located.

In Meade County, Kentucky, which borders the Ohio River, there is a large stretch of poor farmland typical of much of the eroded, unfertile area which lines the river on both sides. The local population in the vicinity of Otter Creek, around which our field studies were centered, had formerly been supported by the river traffic that is now practically gone, and by the lumbering and wood-working operations which also disappeared with the exhaustion of nearby forest resources. For many years now, the inhabitants of Otter Creek have had to depend upon the soil for their existence.

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Nature, however, had not fitted this rolling topography for cultivation. When turned by the plough, the loose earth rapidly eroded and, never very fertile, it quickly became impoverished and incapable of adequately supporting farms. Many of the people in the area moved away to seek better opportunities elsewhere. Others, however, were not so fortunate as to find a means of disposing of their poor land, and with all the uncertainties which during recent years have faced the job-hunter in industry, they were unwilling to leave their homes and farms, poor though they might be.

Another aspect of the picture at Otter Creek is presented by the fact that the taxes collected in the area do not by any means cover the amounts which the county is forced to spend each year in supplying roads and schools to the inhabitants. Figures supplied by the county show that every year it spends in this Otter Creek area about \$1,800 more than it collects in taxes, the greater part of this amount being for schools.

By purchasing more than two thousand acres of land in the Otter Creek area, the Land Program is doing three things. First, it is helping out the present inhabitants of the area who will be assisted in obtaining better farms elsewhere. Second, it is aiding the county by relieving it of the necessity of spending \$1,800 to educate the families of Otter Creek and give them roads. Finally, it is making possible the conservation and better use of the land.

In this particular case, the land to be purchased will be developed as a recreation area by the National Park Service. Within fifty miles of the project there are several hundred thousand people in need of outdoor playgrounds and camping sights. Proper steps will be taken to stop and prevent soil erosion, by the reforestation of steep slopes, and the application of other control methods. Furthermore, the development of the recreational area will not only provide immediate jobs in the locality, but will also offer to the community the opportunity of trading with the large numbers of campers and picnickers who may be expected to visit Otter Creek.

These three purposes: assisting farmers now living on poor land to achieve a better livelihood, relieving the counties and towns of the expenses incurred in servicing areas of low tax yield, and conserving and utilizing natural resources in the most beneficial manner, are involved in Land Program projects throughout the country. Details differ, of course, depending upon the circumstances of each locality. In several states of the southeast, poor land is being purchased for development as forests rather than recreation areas. In the great plains of the west, arid lands will be acquired for utilization as grazing areas, some of which will be devoted to the use of the Indians. In some cases unoccupied tracts of land have been acquired which because of their essential suitability for conservational or recreational use, will be of greater social value in public ownership.

The activities of the Land Program of the Federal Government, in acquiring land and putting it to a better use, constitute a new element in our national conservation program. However, it involves a policy to which common sense was bound to lead us sooner or later. Practical experience has demonstrated to us the folly of attempting to use for farming large areas of land which cannot successfully support a farming population even in times of high prices. Likewise, large stranded rural populations testify to the unfortunate social consequences of an unrestricted exploitation and destruction of forests, and the exhaustion of our soil. The Land Program has achieved much in demonstrating just how the government, both local and national, may take steps to restore to the people the full heritage of the land and its human values.